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Human resources management

Competitive examination for promotion to the Professional category of staff members from other categories

Note by the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. By section V, paragraph 22, of its resolution 53/221 of 7 April 1999, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to complete the realignment with the national competitive examination for promotion to the Professional category and above of staff members from other categories, in particular regarding academic qualifications and equitable geographical distribution, as well as equal treatment with regard to probationary appointments.

2. In a statement to the Fifth Committee on 31 March 1999, the Secretariat drew attention to the serious implications for the career development of serving staff members in the General Service and related categories of the inclusion in the above paragraph of the new element of "equitable geographical distribution". At the 97th plenary meeting of the General Assembly, on 7 April 1999, in the light of the statement of the Secretariat, several delegations requested the Secretary-General to inform the Assembly of the impact of, and any difficulties arising from, the implementation of the above paragraph to enable the Assembly to revert to the issue.

3. The present note is submitted pursuant to that request.

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II. Distinction between the national competitive examination and the G to P examination

4. At the outset, the Secretary-General would draw attention to the difference between the objectives of the competitive examination for the promotion of serving General Service staff to the Professional category (G to P) and the national competitive examination for the recruitment of entry-level Professional staff.

5. The G to P examination was established by the General Assembly in its resolution 33/143 of 20 December 1978 as the exclusive means of promotion to the Professional category for staff serving in the General Service and related categories. The Assembly indicated that:

> "Movement of staff from the General Service category to the Professional category should be limited to the P-1 and P-2 levels and be permitted up to 30 per cent of the total posts available for appointment at those levels and such recruitment should be conducted exclusively through competitive methods of selection from General Service staff with at least five years' experience and post-secondary educational qualifications." (sect. I, para. 1 (g))

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6. By contrast, the national competitive examination was developed to expedite the recruitment of nationals from unrepresented and under-represented countries, with a view to achieving equitable geographic distribution in the United Nations Secretariat. The General Assembly in resolution 33/143 stated that:

> "Competitive methods of recruitment should be used in consultation with the Governments concerned, organized on a national, subregional or regional basis, for selection of staff at the P-1 and P-2 levels with a view to making the geographical distribution of posts in the Secretariat more equitable." (ibid., para. 1 (h))

III. Alignment of the two examinations

7. In accordance with subsequent General Assembly resolutions, including resolutions 41/206 A of 11 December 1986 and 51/226 of 3 April 1997, the two examinations have been brought into broad alignment. The same examination is offered to all candidates, and all candidates must possess a university degree in an area related to the subject area of the examination.

8. In view of the fact that the objectives of the two examinations differ, one being a recruitment exercise and the other a promotion exercise, the upper age-limit for a candidate sitting for the national competitive examination is 32, while candidates for the G to P examination must have five years of experience with the United Nations, but have no age criterion applied.

IV. Implications of section V, paragraph 22, of General Assembly resolution 53/221

9. As indicated above, in her statement to the Fifth Committee on 31 March 1999, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management drew attention to the implications of the inclusion in section V, paragraph 22, of resolution 53/221 of the concept of "equitable geographical distribution" in the following way:

> "The G to P examination, unlike the national competitive examination, is not a recruitment examination, but rather a promotion exercise for staff already in service in the Organization — the one and only means of promotion from the General Service category to the Professional category. Hundreds of staff compete each year for a very small number of posts. Hundreds more each year, at their own expense, continue their education to acquire a university degree with the hope that, one day, they may get the opportunity to sit for the G to P exam. The wording of paragraph 22 would mean that some serving General Service staff would be denied any opportunity for promotion because of, and by reason of, their nationality, which has never been a criterion for promotion, or a ground to deny promotion. This will be extremely damaging for staff morale since staff in all categories should be afforded opportunities for career growth with the Organization."

10. Subsequently, grave concern about the implications of the decision of the General Assembly was expressed by over 1,000 staff in a letter to the Secretary-General. That concern was reiterated at the annual session of the global Staff-Management Coordination Committee in July 1999.

11. Pending further review by the General Assembly, the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management informed staff, in information circular ST/IC/1999/55 of 27 July 1999, which sets out the procedures for the next G to P examination, that:

> "In view of the request to the Secretary-General contained in paragraph 22 of section V of General Assembly resolution 53/221 of 7 April 1999, all eligible candidates will be allowed to take the examination, but the results of the examination, including the marking of the papers of nationals of over-represented countries, will be subject to the outcome of the review of the issue by the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session." (para.8)

12. The Secretary-General is particularly concerned about the potential for inequitable treatment of staff, which may not be consistent with the principles of the Charter and staff regulation 4.2. That regulation states that: "The paramount consideration in the appointment, transfer or promotion of the staff shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competency and integrity." Any treatment of serving staff members based solely on nationality would be of questionable legality, and very damaging to staff morale, especially in cases where staff members, relying on existing conditions, have devoted considerable effort and incurred significant expense in acquiring a degree for the purpose of qualifying for the G to P examination.

13. The Secretary-General also considers that applying "equitable geographical distribution" as a factor in the G to P examination would be contrary to the General Assembly's repeated requests to promote the career development of staff

at all levels. In resolution 53/221, the Secretary-General is requested "to implement a transparent promotion policy, augmented by the effective use of a simplified and appropriate performance appraisal system, adequate training and competitive examinations, in order to provide for the recognition of competence and outstanding performance and to facilitate the continuous professional growth of staff at all levels".

14. Moreover, the Organization's policy for placement and promotion, as set out in paragraph 13 of administrative instruction ST/AI/413, reads, *inter alia*: "The paramount consideration in the assignment or promotion of staff shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity. The criteria for promotion set out in this paragraph apply to all staff members without exception."

15. Implementation of the new provision set out in paragraph 22, section V of resolution 53/221 would deny specific staff members any possibility of promotion, by reason of their nationality.

16. It may also be noted that implementation of the provision would have a negative effect on the Secretary-General's efforts to increase the number of women in the Professional category, an initiative strongly supported by the General Assembly. Some two thirds of staff members who sit for and who succeed in the G to P examination are women.

V. Conclusion

17. In view of the above, the Secretary-General would request the Assembly to reconsider the issue with a view to removing the concept of equitable geographical distribution as a factor in the alignment of the examinations.